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ABSTRACT

The author examines the implications of too much specialization in the present school system. The division of courses into separate units with little relationship to each other is discussed in the light of the impact upon the student. The process results in assimilation of disconnected concepts and facts, and produces students who perceive their function as performing allotted roles at different times with detachment, acquiring mathematical skills, for example, without sensing how they may relate to a larger arena such as social science. The argument is put forth that teachers must begin to address themselves to the issue of humanistic and social skills development and enrichment, without losing sight of the importance of basic skills as the foundation of a complete education. (JD)

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A BASIC SKILLS BASED CURRICULUM FOR STUDENT LEARNING: SOME RAMIFICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION IN THE 1980s

Richard O. Peters, Ed.D.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Peters received his Bachelor of Science in Education and Masters of Education degrees from The University of Maine (Orono); pursued doctoral studies at The Florida State University (Tallahassee); and was granted the Doctor of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction by The University of Rochester (NY).

Dr. Peters has been a classroom teacher of social studies, science, and general mathematics (grades 5-12); has been an ESEA Title III curriculum researcher for an inner city project (grades 7-9); has been a Kindergarten through grade twelve curriculum coordinator; has been a grades 9-12 department chairman; has conducted curriculum development studies at The Florida State University laboratory school; has supervised student teachers enrolled in the College of Education - The University of Rochester; and has directed an NIE funded R & D project involved with instructional program planning - development - implementation - evaluation - revision - process monitoring as well as related teacher in-service training.

The author is currently a member of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), The American Educational Research Association (AERA), and the New Hampshire State Advisory Committee for Career Education. He is also a member of Alpha Kappa Delta (The University of Southern California) and Delta Tau Kappa (The Florida State University). Dr. Peters is a past member of the *Instructional Media* and *Curriculum* advisory committees of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).

STATEMENT

For too long the individual student has been segmented by an impersonal system of training called formal education.

Today's schools give students the experience of being processed; being treated not as unique beings but rather as the masses.

THE AMERICAN SCHOOLING PROCESS

It has been said that the American education system epitomizes a segmentation mentality.

Our schools have become an arena of specialization that cuts reality into little pieces -- each piece being the domain of a relatively small group of *experts*. As a result of this organization, students come to assume that knowledge can be categorized into specialties.

We have reached a point-in-time along the schooling process continuum where courses of study have become so specialized that each treats only a part of the total person -- at any given time. During the course of a typical school day the student must become a mathematician familiar with sets, in the social studies class the student becomes a skilled social scientist rooting out the causes of social unrest, and in the sciences the student becomes a probing biologist or creative chemist. All day long this process goes on -- resulting in the further breakdown or segmentation of the concept: the whole child.

This process results in an endless array of disconnected concepts and facts, and produces students who perceive their

function as performing allotted roles with impersonal detachment (Wheeler 1968). Students who can think, feel, and value are trapped within settings which tend to cut off basic human qualities.

Segmented education tends to stiffle the *proactive behavior* (Allport 1962) of the individual. SELF/OTHER identity formation becomes difficult in the context of a segmented education system. Segmentation of process demands and an equivalent segmentation of individuals' personalities -- resulting in a *multiple personality* (Mead 1956) or *identity diffusion* (Erikson 1969).

Why are our schools the way they are today? Why are students processed, evaluated and segmented in impersonal ways?

TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

John Dewey and his disciples advocated that schools should function to coordinate the diverse influences of the various social environments into which the child enters.

Schools should mediate the antagonistic poles of competing realities which put individuals in danger of being split into beings having different standards of judgment and emotions for different occassions.

Wholeness was the key to Dewey's philosophy of progressive education -- although an emphasis was placed on direct student involvement in his/her own process of becoming. Whatever is done in the name of learning should consider the total abilities, interests, and values of the child.

The outbreak of World War II and the Korean Conflict resulted in a renewed regimentation of school aged children. Concerns for individual personalities and uniqueness were put aside and an emphasis was placed on indoctrination into the social order. The 1940s and early 1950s was a time of renewed interest in citizenship education and civic/social training. Within the educational curriculum an emphasis was placed on the 3R's. Allegiance to one's country was paramount.

In late 1957 there occurred an event which was to have dramatic impact and lasting effect on America's educational process -- the launching and space orbit of SPUTNIK -- by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

There resulted a national panic. The Soviet Union had entered the *space race* ahead of the United States. What was the matter with America's scientists? Why hadn't the United States beat the Russians into space? What is wrong with America's educational system? These were some of the queries posed by alarmists such as Dr. James Conant and Admiral Hyman Rickover. America's schools became critics' scapegoats -- with criticism for paying too great attention to children rather than to subject matter. While Rickover and Clifton Fadiman decried the *frills* of modern education Arthur Bestor and others advocated a return to the basics; reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and foreign languages. The experience units, centers of interest, problems of living, creative thinking, and unit method strategies of the Progressive Era were pooh-poohed.

What resulted from the public outcry for change was change -- away from a concern for and interest in children as individuals toward a concerted effort to manipulate and regiment students in the name of national security. Overnight, an emphasis was placed on the training and production of skilled mathematicians and scientists. The United States needed to *catch up* with the Russians in space and the American education process was charged with processing students in these subject matter areas.

Curriculums were rewritten -- with an emphasis on mathematics and science programs. All other areas of the instructional process were ignored. After all, a liberal arts education did not produce the technician needed to design and build a booster rocket or to launch a grape fruit sized satellite into space. On January 31, 1958 the United States did enter the space race with the successful launching and orbit of Vanguard I.

Millions of federal dollars would be pumped into math and science programs over the next decade through the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) title programs. Beginning in the early 1960s the social studies and other subject matter areas were reorganized -- with an emphasis on scientific processes such as discovery, inquiry, decision making, and the scientific method.

TODAY

This capsule look at the past fifty years of American

education sets the stage for what is happening in classrooms across America - today.

Those who advocated specialization in the 1950s and early 1960s sowed the seeds of segmentation and diffusion which we are faced with today in our schools.

At the teacher training institution level pre-service students are trained in compartmentalized/specialized areas of the total learning process. They are being taught to perceive the student as a segmented entity -- much the same way we perceive steer beeves to be roasts and steaks on the meatcutter's chart.

In the nation's schools students continue to be processed in the several unrelated subject matter areas of the curriculum. Teachers are hired for their specializations and are allowed to conduct their classes in ways which best enhance the transfer of their personal enthusiasm for and knowledge about content to students. The result being that America is producing a specialized elite class. Students with average and above average abilities are constantly bombarded with unrelated content area facts.

In the social environment of the real world prospective employers seek those high school graduates who possess specialized skills. For those employees on-the-job there are ample opportunities to become more specialized about and proficient in the jobs they are performing.

It would appear that there is no escaping the processes of segmentation and specialization. Rather than attempting to present a unified environment to students -- schools

celebrate and extend the fragmentation of modern life. The schools are, in fact, reflecting the segmented character of modern life.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The education process, and those involved in it, must become concerned with the development of individuals as persons -- as members of the world community of human beings. In short, the advocates of *humanistic education* promote the development of *self-actualizing* persons.

If the self-actualizing person is to exist in fact then the school must begin to develop and promote a sense of *wholeness* in its stated philosophy of purpose, the instructional curriculum, and in the process of learning. Within this context of wholeness the individual child is perceived as being and is treated as a total entity. There is no earthly way by which the child's abilities, attitudes, interests, and values can be manipulated on a specialized course-by-course basis without seriously effecting human development and personal perceptions of SELF and others.

For those college students enrolled in teacher pre-service training programs -- there is a need for them to develop not only specialized abilities and interests re: subject matter concepts, content,and skills, but also those attributes which promote wholeness of self in thought, action, and deed. In-service training programs must begin to address themselves to the issue of humanistic and social skills development/enrichment among classroom teachers,

support staffs, and administrators. Both now, and in the future, there is need for an emphasis on the collective worth of subject matter re: human growth and development, rather than on continued specialization and the fragmentation of the education process and the child.

This is not to say that factual content, specialized processes and vocabularies, and the technical skills akin to the several diverse subject matter areas of the curriculum should be either ignored or abandoned in the process of developing an instructional strategy attuned to *wholeness*. To the contrary, these specialities must be retained and woven into a pattern of interrelations and academic harmony. As fibers are twisted or plaited together into a cord, rope, or cable -- so should the character and nature of the several diverse disciplines of knowledge be twisted or plaited together to form a *process of becoming* which serves the intellectual, emotional, physical, and vocational interests/needs of all students.

There must be a balancing between specialized subject matter interests and the interests of students. It should be remembered that schools exist to serve students and not vice versa.

SKILLS

In order to create a state of harmony between the interests of the specialized disciplines of knowledge, the community/school, and the student and to guarantee that each will be well-served by the process of formalized

schooling there is need to sit down and identify those basic skills essential for the propagation of the disciplines of knowledge, perpetuation of the social order, and betterment of the child.

What are the various subject matter content, concepts, and skills needed by all students? What are the community's expectations of the school(s)? What do students want and need in the way of academic/physical training and preparation for life? These are some of the questions that can be raised when attempting to identify those basic academic, social, and personal skills which should constitute the basis of a life oriented curriculum.

.Certainly there is need for each individual to be able to adequately communicate with his fellows. Thus, attention must be paid to those language arts skills which equip the student for life, e.g., listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

.Within the social studies disciplines are worthwhile civic/social skills which should be promoted among all students, e.g., attitudes, behaviors, interpersonal relations, cooperative behavior, and values.

.The natural and physical sciences are the arena for student exposure to the real world about them. There is need for students to be knowledgeable about their life space environment.

.Exercises in mathematics not only discipline the mind but also provide the opportunity for the integration of qualities of logic and systematic pro-

gression into the life style of the individual.

.The arts and humanities provide opportunities for cultural awareness/enrichment and enhance aesthetic qualities within the individual.

.Vocational training provides opportunities for personal skills development and preparation for careers within the world of work.

All in all, each specialized area of the total curriculum serves the individual in diverse ways. The point to be made is that the several specialized subject matter areas of the curriculum must serve the student in ways which enhance personal dignity and worth.

Teachers must realize that while each of their specialized disciplines of knowledge play an important role in the continuous and sequential (K-12) process of student learning they, in the final analysis, must be integrated into a pattern of instruction which is keyed to student development. Teachers must develop perceptions of their specialized disciplines in relation to other subject matter areas (See Diagram I) -- and not as isolated islands of knowledge (See Diagram II). Each teacher must become more-knowledgeable about other subject matter areas of the curriculum. Pre-service and in-service programs must be structured so as to encourage and provide opportunities for multi-discipline awareness and exploration re: *content, concepts, instructional hardware/software, pedagogical strategies, philosophies,* and *skills.*

DIAGRAM I: INTEGRATED DISCIPLINES

(An implosion effect infusion movement focusing on student development)

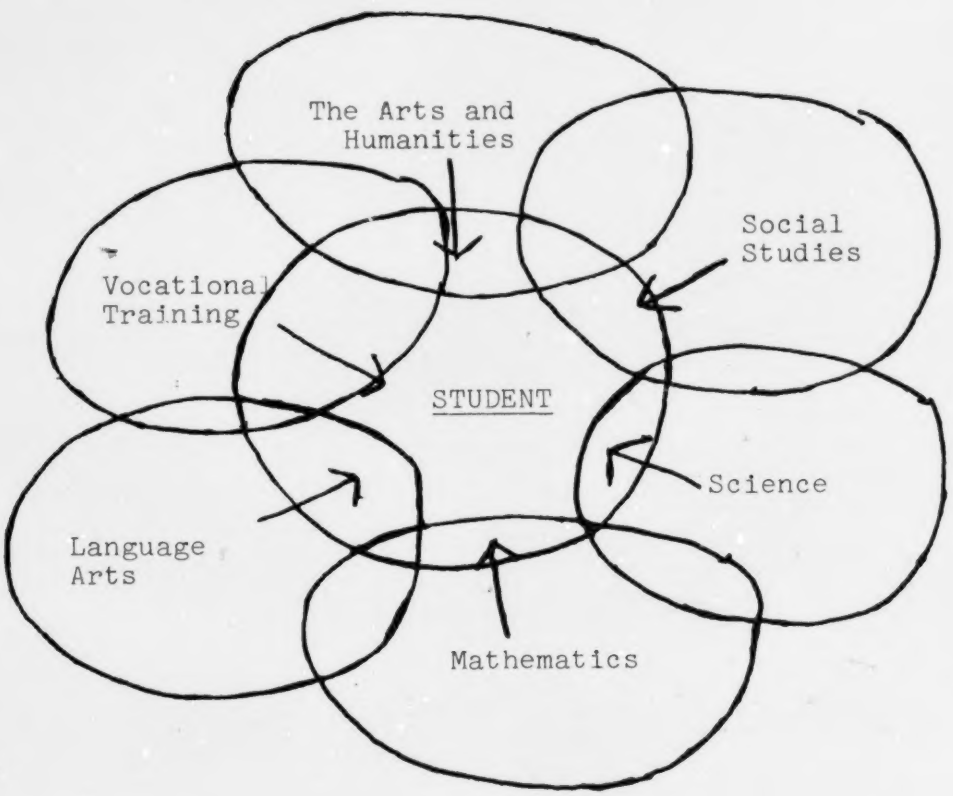
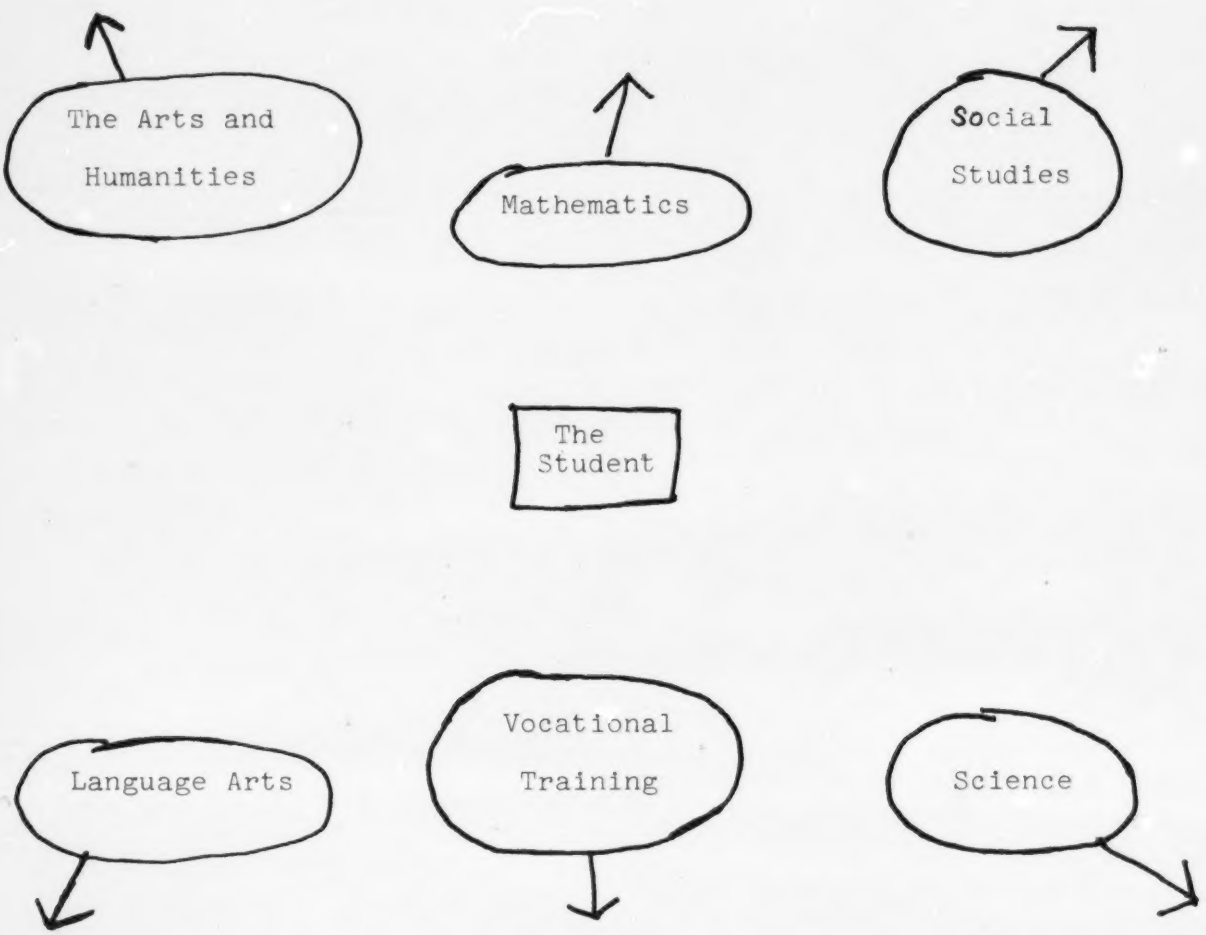


DIAGRAM II: SEGMENTED DISCIPLINES

(An explosion effect diffusion movement
focusing on subject matter specialization)



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